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Ancient America

at the

Panama-California Exposition

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Ancient America at the Panama-California Exposition, San Diego, California

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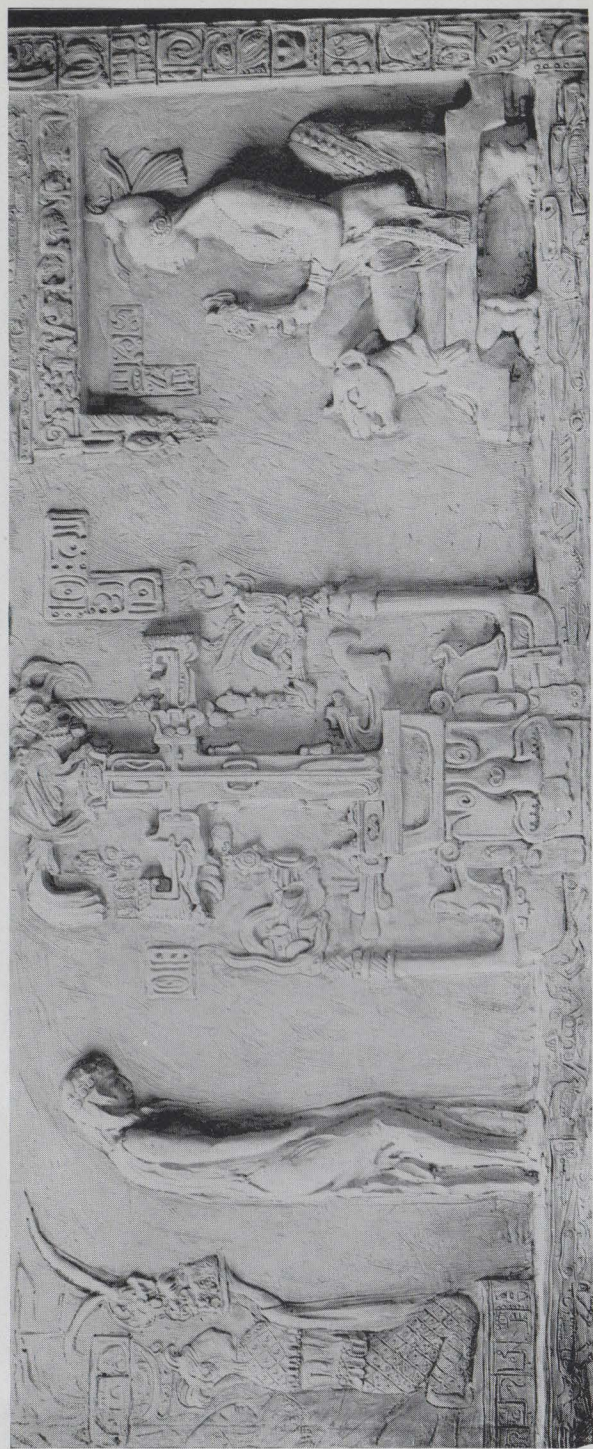
Director of the School of American Archaeology

FOR the first time in the history of Expositions an entire building is devoted to Ancient America. Not one for which no other use could be found, but the noble California building, greatest of all in the Exposition City.

Here will be seen the most important works of the ancient peoples of Central America. They present a picture of an age in America of which Americans generally are not well informed, namely, that which immediately preceded the coming of Europeans to the western continent. Knowledge of American history usually begins with the period of discovery and conquest, and follows down to the present time. Here we begin at the usual point and looking back, view the history of a civilization that reached its zenith and went down before it was known to white men.

The cities that have long lain buried in the tropical jungles have been the subject of much misleading romance. Fantastic theories about these people, their Oriental or Egyptian origin, their empires, kings, queens, and courts, the mystery of "Vanished Races"—all this may be dismissed. There is nothing mysterious about it. The ancient temple builders of Central America were American Indians. All the characteristics of the race are seen in these ancient monuments. Like other races they slowly struggled up through a long period of evolution, matured, for a time expressed their mental and spiritual power in great works, ran their course and died, as is inevitable with individuals and races when they grow old.

It would be misleading to pretend that any connected history of the Central American Cities could be written at this time. Their records, in the form of hieroglyphic inscriptions, are a sealed book, except as they relate to numeration and chronology. None of the characters used in the writings of the Mayas bear any resemblance



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THE RETURN OF THE ORACLE
A panel of the Maya Frieze. Mrs. Jean Cook-Smith, Sculptor.

whatever to those of the Egyptian or any other ancient people. All reports to the effect that Orientals have been able to interpret the symbols of the Central American monuments, or understand the language of the native people, may be put down as false.

For the study of the hieroglyphic writings we must depend mainly upon the inscriptions carved in stone. These, found on monuments, walls, tablets, and lintels, have survived the ruin of the ages. Sacred books, or codices, were once numerous, but now only three are known to exist. Large numbers of them were destroyed at the time of the Spanish conquest of Yucatan on account of their supposedly pagan character.

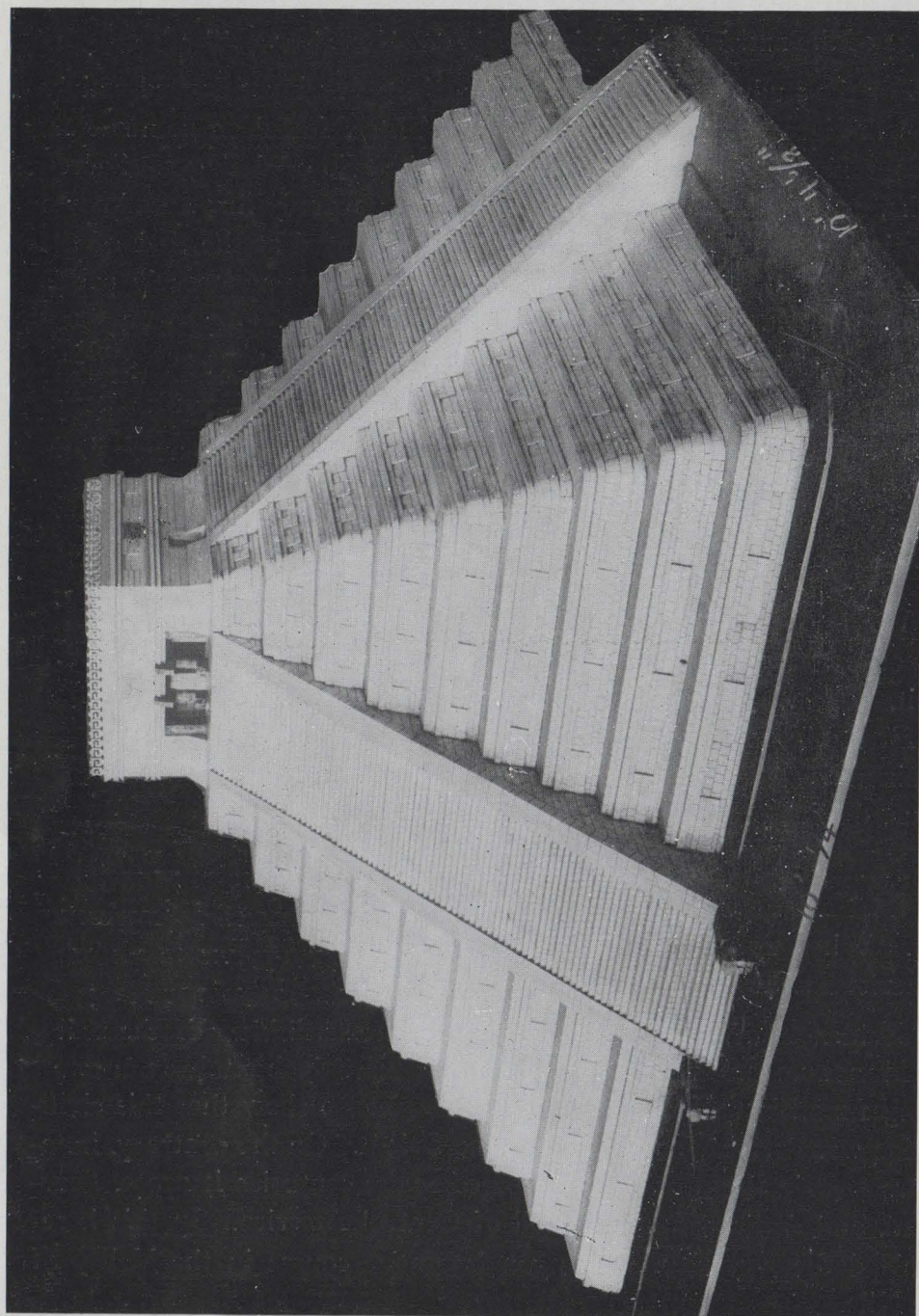
Nothing could be set down as final with reference to the date of any Central American city in terms of the Christian calendar. In the subject of Maya chronology there is little agreement among students. Certain authorities, who are worthy of the highest respect, date the Maya cities as early as the twelfth century B. C. Others place them in the early part of the Christian era.

Without entering upon a discussion of this subject, the writer is disposed to fix the period represented by the monuments in this exhibit, within the first thousand years of our era. During the first half of this millennium civilization flourished in Central America, attained its zenith, and during the latter half, through causes unknown to us, decline occurred.

Among the older cities are Copan, Quirigua, Tikal, and Palenque: the later are Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and other cities of Northern Yucatan. When America was first seen by the Europeans, the Central American cities lay in ruins in the jungles, as they do now.

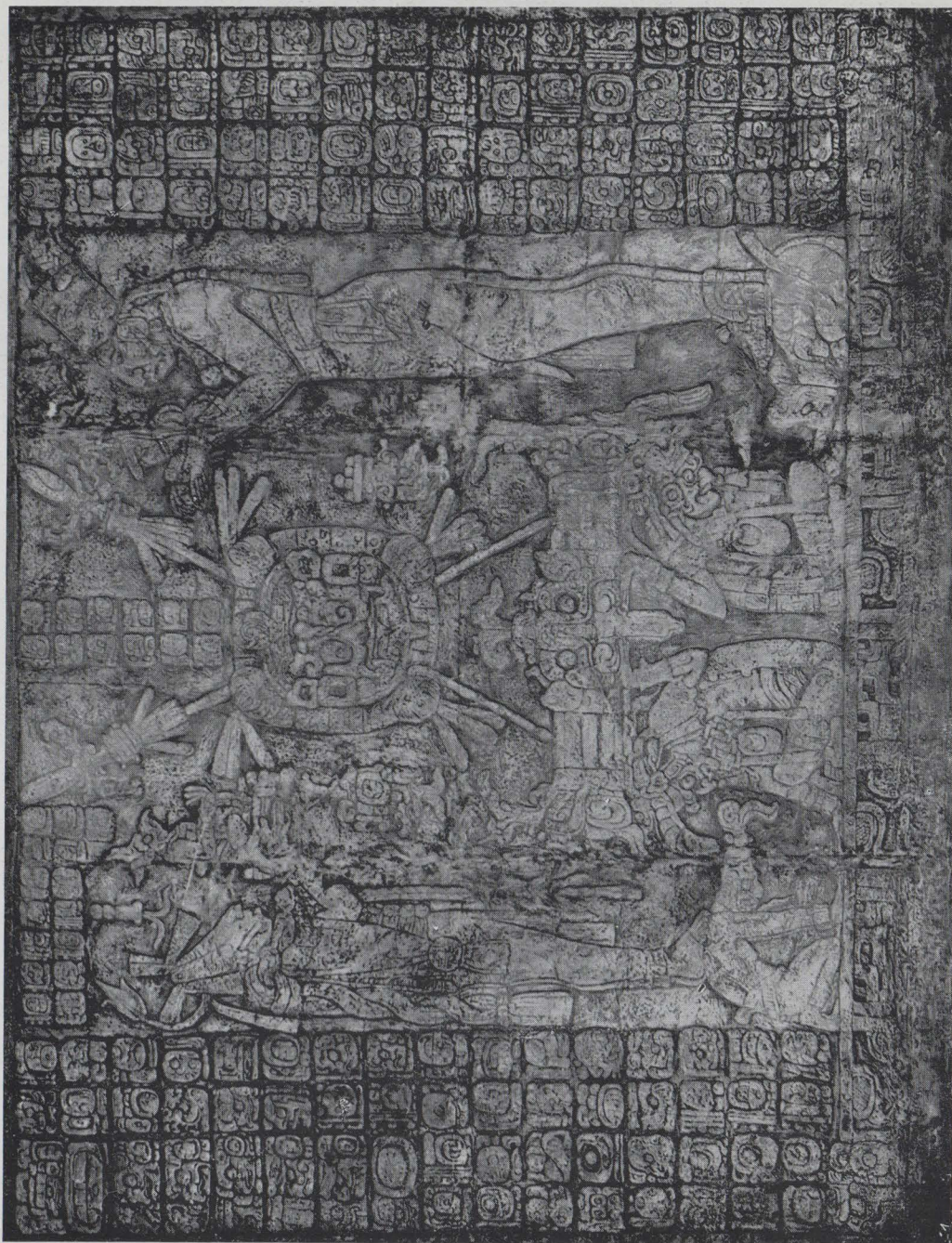
Evidences of a long period prior to the setting up of the sculptured monuments and the inscriptions of hieroglyphic tablets are now being found in Guatemala. No proof exists to show that this civilization was derived from Egypt or the Orient. On the contrary, it appears certain that during a period of many centuries it arose, flourished, and declined upon the soil of Central America. In this it resembled the Egyptian, which ran its entire course in the Valley of the Nile.

It is customary to speak of the people of all the Central American cities as the Mayas, but that they were all of one stock cannot be



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MODEL OF THE TEMPLE OF SACRIFICE, CHICHEN ITZA, YUCATAN



TABLET OF THE SUN ALTAR
Bas-relief from the Temple of the Sun, Palenque, Mexico

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claimed with certainty. It could not be proven that the people of Copan and Quirigua in the Motagua Valley spoke the same language or that they were the same stock as the people of the cities of Yucatan or the Usamacinta Valley in Mexico. The fact that they used the same architectural principles in building and the same hieroglyphic symbols is not conclusive of linguistic or ethnic identity. In the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico it is not uncommon to find two Indian towns less than twenty miles apart where the people speak entirely different languages, yet build their houses and sanctuaries in the same way, and use the same symbolic characters.

The ancient cities of Central America may properly be spoken of as "Temple Cities." Among the ruined buildings there is little to suggest residential use or domestic life. It is probable that the ancient people lived much as do those of the present time, in houses of bamboo, or other light material, thatched with palm. This civilization was profoundly religious in character, a trait of the entire American Indian race. With probably no other people known has religious ceremony been so generally intermingled with all the activities of life. As the condition of society called for nothing elaborate in residence building, so, also, the political organization was such as to require little in the way of public building for civic purposes. Monarchy was unknown. The government was theocratic and republican in character. There was no splendor of courts and no state government to provide for.

But religious life was highly organized. Everything else was subservient. The mysteries of the priesthood necessitated sanctuaries, shrines, altars, gorgeous vesture, and representations of gods. Imposing ceremonies, processions, and rituals demanded temples, sacred precincts, and facilities for the display of magic power with which to awe the populace. The building of a city meant the erection of temples and statues and their embellishment with images, inscriptions, and symbolic decorations.

Never before have the noble works of the Mayas been given such a setting as here in the Exposition of San Diego, and never before have they been presented in such perfection. Some of us dare to hope that this is the beginning of a general awakening to the importance of a great people, possibly to the opening up of a veritable treasure-house of knowledge, long obscured but not destined to perpetual oblivion.



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SCULPTURAL MONUMENT, QUIRIGUA, GUATEMALA

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